“Wherever There’s A Need”:
Ethel Clark-Griffin Finds New Ways To Give Back

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Giving back to others makes life meaningful – and anything is possible, with a little bit of faith, and focus. That’s how Benton Harbor resident Ethel Clark-Griffin summarizes her philosophy, which finds an outlet through her church activities at Greater Grace Temple, and her community involvements – which include the Berrien County Democratic Party, Benton Harbor Public Library Board, and Girl Scouts of America, among others.

These involvements often take a deeply personal turn, as Clark-Griffin knows from serving as chairman of Greater Grace Temple’s Hospitality Committee – where her responsibilities range from emceeing and organizing the Christmas and Easter programs, to honoring birthdays, or distributing food to people in need. As an example, she cites the “Love Day” event that Greater Grace held last to mark Valentine’s Day 2016 – which also happened to fall on a Sunday.

“If there was somebody you wanted to show appreciation, whether they gave you an encouraging word, or did something to uplift you – you brought ‘em a gift,” Clark-Griffin said. “I had a big Santa Claus bag of gifts, because I gave to a lot of people. Everybody was excited, and loved that. I also had a ‘Secret Santa’ on Christmas, too, because some people never get gifts. I wanted to spread love and joy among each other.”

“I Always Was Focused”

At times, Clark-Griffin has needed that same kind of love and support. The most recent example came on Christmas Eve of 2016, when her father died. The next day, Clark-Griffin emceed the Christmas program at her church, and helped to pass out four Butterball turkeys, and smaller boxes of food to those in need. Three turkeys went to families who were longtime church members, who were also recovering from a serious auto accident. “That was our way of showing that we care, and we love ‘em,” she said. “A lot of people didn’t even know he (her father) had died – because he didn’t stay here, Clark-Griffin recalled. “He was in Alabama. I didn’t announce it till after the service was over. One of the members got up, and said, ‘You’ve got to be strong, woman, ‘cause there’s no way I would have been to pull that out, knowing that I just had lost my dad.’”

However, Clark-Griffin pulled through, which she credits to her faith, as well as the support of her church family – and her own outlook of doing whatever it takes to overcome an obstacle. “I always was focused, from the time that I was young,” Clark-Griffin said. “When I was in elementary (school), I added so fast, they called me ‘Computer.’ They would have their calculator, I would just do it (a calculation) in my mind – so that was my name.”

Clark-Griffin has been a Benton Harbor resident since she was five, when her family moved from its original home, Alabama – and became the third oldest child, in a family of three brothers, and two sisters. Clark-Griffin graduated in 1988 from Benton Harbor High School. Within two years, she completed an associate’s degree, in criminal justice, at Lake Michigan College. In 2002, she returned to LMC, and got an associate’s degree in business administration.

At 24, Clark-Griffin began working at Javis Manufacturing (formerly known as Atlantic Automotive), where she’s held various positions – including team leader, for eight years – and chairman of her union’s executive board, where she also did auditing and bookkeeping. Along the way, Clark-Griffin raised three sons – now 30, 20, and 14 – largely by herself, and recovering from a serious auto accident. “That was our need,” Clark-Griffin said. “My goal is to uplift, empower, and encourage. I’ve had people say, ‘That money helped me. That card helped me. She’s been married for eight years now.”

“My Goal Is To Uplift”

Not surprisingly, family life has played a part in guiding Clark-Griffin’s community work. For example, she’s given to the American Cancer Society since she was 18 – because “cancer has taken my mom, my grandma, and a lot of other people, at young ages, in my life,” she notes. Clark-Griffin got more deeply involved in her church at 17, where she’s also been a youth leader, and Sunday school teacher – so working with children is a natural outgrowth of those efforts. Making sure that children get adequate support and role models is a big priority for Clark-Griffin, which is why she got involved with Girl Scouts last June, doing whatever is needed – whether it’s organizing events, or helping to count the cookies.

Asked how she balances all these commitments, Clark-Griffin responds: “You have things that you want to see done, and want to accomplish, you make time for it.” As an example, she points to the home that she bought at 26, and paid off – along with four cars – by the time she turned 45. “I was a single mom of two boys (when I bought the house),” Clark-Griffin said. “I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be comfortable, not wanting for things. It was focus, just ‘focus.’

That same philosophy guides her involvement in the Hospitality Committee – where Clark-Griffin gets plenty of reminders about why its work is so important. “It’s my outreach, just doing wherever there’s a need,” Clark-Griffin said. “My goal is to uplift, empower, and encourage. That’s my outreach, that’s my ‘Computer.’ That money helped me. That card helped me. I needed that encouragement. That hug helped me. At all the different events I’ve done in church, I’m always getting people saying, ‘Thank you. Thank you for starting this program.’”

Asked what keeps her spirit alive, Clark-Griffin responds: “What keeps my spirit alive is God, and joy. I have a need to help people, a want, and a strong desire to help people. I love to see people happy.”